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# Outline of Zeami's Philosophy of Practice and Expertise: A Heuristic Resume

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## **ZEAMI (1363-1443)**

Japan's most celebrated actor and playwright composed more than thirty of the finest plays of Noh drama. He also wrote a variety of theoretical texts on theater and performance, and especially, a profound insight into 'Keiko' (lesson, practice, exercise, discipline, expertise).

The theoretical texts, called in English 'Performance Notes', have been written as the secret 'letters' for the authorized followers. It has never been accessible to general readers for five hundred years. In 1909 the first substantial body of the text was discovered and further additions came as late as in 1955. Since these texts have come to light, Zeami has become popular as a representative intellectual of the so-called middle age.

## **THE MAIN FEATURES OF ZEAMI'S THOUGHT**

### *'The non-precaution' beyond precautions*

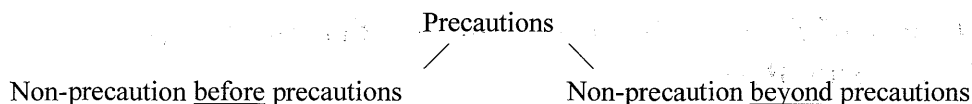
Zeami has emphasized the significance of 'precautions' in the performance. It is very important to have 'the precautions regarding what is right and what is wrong that are beyond perception' (Chige no Hi no Yohjin) (Zeami, 2008, p. 184).

Noh-performers must have such precautions (mindfulness, awareness), and it is not enough to be a great virtuoso (virtuosity.) What do they need to be a great virtuoso? Zeami's answer is: 'non-precaution beyond precautions'.

It is, he writes; 'the rank of performance from which any such hazard regarding precautions is gone, and whatever the character of the performance, it is of great virtuosity (virtuoso), while it may strike one as a truly unusual display, it nonetheless is interesting and empty of right and wrong or good and bad. If both right and wrong are interesting, then there can be no judgment as to right or wrong' (Kono Yohjin no Ayabumi mo naku) (ibid.).

In his idea 'the rank of non-precaution' is higher than 'the rank of precautions'. Noh-performers should forget (transcend) the conscious precautions regarding what is considered to be wrong at an actual performance.

We may now raise a question about 'the rank of non-precaution'. Is it possible to distinguish 'the non-precaution beyond precautions' from 'the non-precaution before precautions'?



*'Without-skills', beyond skills or before skills*

He has answered in another text, the context of the appeal and expression in 'singing'. He differentiates between the two types of appealing in singing. On the one hand, 'With-skills' (with figure, brilliant texture, U-MON)', on the other hand, 'Without-skills' (without-figure, unobtrusive texture, MU-MON,).

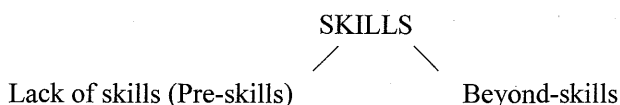
While a Noh actor 'With-skills' sings 'plenty of passages to display a brilliant musical texture', the actor of 'Without-skills' sings 'unobtrusive vocal texture and no melodies that draws particular attention to themselves, but merely an overall beauty and fullness of body in the vocal expression' (p. 179).

Zeami, however, finds two different types of 'unobtrusive texture'. One is the 'unobtrusive' that transcends a brilliant texture, and the other is the 'unobtrusive' simply with his pure obtuseness and the lack of practice.

About the former type, he writes; 'a type of excitement that sounds like no melodic articulation and patternlessness and that comes from the long experience of the performer', or, 'the patternlessness that has transcendent brilliant texture' (U-mon wo kiwamesugitaru Mu-mon) (ibid.).

By contrast, the later type means; 'someone who is patternless out of his pure obtuseness, who in fact doesn't know anything about melody, who has not been taught about accentuation, whose patternlessness is simply vacancy of mind' (Hugaku no Mu-mon) (ibid.).

We may now make the following diagram.



\*Pre-skills; Non-skills before mastery of skills, without discipline, Non-precautions, because of inattention.

\*Beyond-skills; Non-skills beyond mastery of skills, impressive with no melodic skills, patternlessness which transcends brilliant texture.

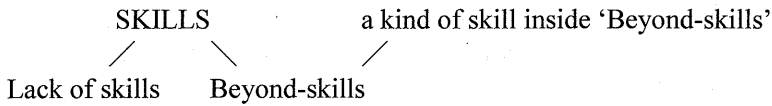
*'Beyond skills' contains 'a new kind of skill' inside*

Zeami, however, explains paradoxically that 'Beyond-skills' is not only without-skills, but it contains a new kind of skill inside.

When something sounds like patternlessness but the excitement, you should recognize to be the patternlessness that has transcendent brilliant texture. This is the rank of the wondrous voice in its greatest achievement. That being case, this unobtrusive musical texture is to be accounted best, because it contains the brilliantly textured. Since it has yet to reach that unsurpassed level, a brilliant musical texture is accounted second (pp. 179-180).

He writes here that 'Beyond-skills' contains a new kind of skill. 'Beyond-skills' does not mean just the lack of skills, but it contains a new kind of skill inside (or behind, potentially).

We are now at the critical point. To examine this relationship carefully, let us add a new stage on the diagram.



*Tentative diagram for discussion*

The following is the explanation of the diagram for discussion.

(1) 'Lack of skills' means the state of being inexperienced and unskilled. We call it 'IMMATURE'. (But this stage means the pure potentiality at the same time. The ambiguity entailed in the negative immature and the positive potentiality will be discussed later.)

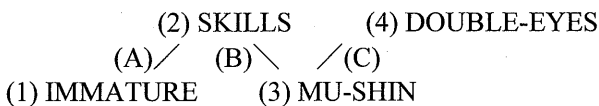
(2) The notion of 'SKILLS' means techniques, artificial play with awareness.

(3) 'Beyond-skills' transcends the rank of SKILLS. There is no intention at this stage. No artificial techniques but very simple and natural. Zeami names this stage 'MU-SHIN'.

'MU-SHIN' means, literally 'non-mind' (MU; non, nothing, emptiness, naught, SHIN; mind, heart, intention). In the context of Zeami's texts this term is translated as 'being without intent', 'excitement without intent', 'the kind of excitement that transcends the mind' or 'a selfless level of art'.

(4) As for the rank of 'a kind of skill inside Beyond-skills', we might call this mystical stage 'DOUBLE-EYES'. Zeami's DOUBLE-EYES could see a new kind of skill and a new kind of intention emerging from the rank of MU-SHIN (No-skills, No-intentions). It is not the same as skill or intention in the rank of 'SKILLS': rather it has been transformed by MU-SHIN.

A person with DOUBLE-EYES can accept two moments which are mutually exclusive. DOUBLE-EYES perceive ambiguous events in a fluid dynamic process. DOUBLE-EYES will be examined later as 'beyond dichotomy' or 'unity of opposites'.



Process (A) may be understood as a construction.

Process (B) may be understood as a de-construction.

Process (C) may be understood as a re-construction.

## DE-CONSTRUCTION AND RE-CONSTRUCTION: CASTING OFF THE OLD SELF AND PUTTING ON THE NEW SELF

*The way of de-construction: self-emptying, abandonment, 'abnegation'*

Zeami's 'Performance Notes' do not begin with the Process (A). He has not left the 'Note' with the followers of IMMATURE, but with the followers with SKILLS. His main teaching is the surrender of the SKILLS, in the process from the stage of SKILLS to that of MU-SHIN.

The skills and techniques are important. However, if the actor is clinging to these artificial skills his performance continues to be intentional. There is the danger of being captivated by self-awareness, and it will disturb a natural fluid movement.

Zeami transmits the state of 'no intention', 'no artificiality', 'no paying attention to one's own movement' through performance. It is important for performers to move according to the movement of one's body, in the situation of the drama.

In order to identify the role in the play a Noh-performer has to surrender not only all the skills which he has acquired in practice, but also all of his intentions, motivations and self-awareness (Noh actors have been only male.)

SKILLS; artificial, intentional, with self-awareness

(B) \

MU-SHIN; natural, fluid, perfect identification with the role

\*cf. 'Via negations' in Catholic mysticism and the idea of St. Paul 'kenōsis (Phil. 2-7)'

\*cf. According to Buddhism the way of De-construction is 'the way of going forth to spiritual enlightenment' (Ō-SŌ), and the way of Re-construction is 'the way of returning back to the daily life (with new enlightenment)' (KAN-SŌ).

*The way of re-construction: rebirth of new awareness*

Process (C) is a re-construction or the re-birth of new awareness.

It is important to avoid a misunderstanding that the intention of SKILLS is preserved behind the state of MU-SHIN and that is appearing now again in the process (C). Intention and awareness will pass away in the process (B). Performers should quest for the perfect abnegation of the intention on the way of de-construction. After the perfect abnegation, the new kind of intention should emerge from the bottom of no-intention.

SKILLS

DOUBLE-EYES; new quality of intention

\(B) abnegation, self-emptying / (C) re-birth, emerging,

MU-SHIN

\*We narrate the process (C) after the process (C), one after another. Strictly speaking, this is not a linear progress in time. Process (C) does not begin after the end of process (B). In Zen-Buddhism (B) and (C) are said to begin 'simultaneously'. Two different processes are united into one. De-construction and Re-construction have to be understood as simultaneous events. The way to MU-SHIN and the way from MU-SHIN are united into one.

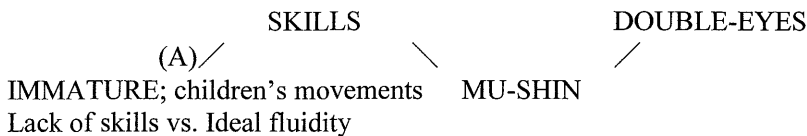
Zen-Buddhism has a special category called 'SOKU (literally, at once)': it is explained that 'the state in which two things that seem to be different outside are one inside'. It is the provocative state of dichotomy, or in other words, 'unity of opposites'.

I think this stage of DOUBLE-EYES is that of 'writing Zeami'. 'Writing Zeami' means the conscious level on which Zeami wrote 'Performance Notes' self-referentially. I differentiate the conscious level of 'writing Zeami' from the conscious level of 'dancing Zeami'. 'Dancing Zeami' plays without any intention at the level of MU-SHIN, whereas the 'writing Zeami' comes out of that level and he examines his own performance with DOUBLE-EYES (writes without any intention and (SOKU, simultaneously) with a new quality of intention).

## PROCESS (A) FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF THE DOUBLE-EYES

Process (A) may be understood as a process of construction. The followers who are still unskilled, inexperienced and immature have to practice skills to control their bodies and minds consciously. Practice and discipline for children are the example of this process of construction.

However, the meaning of the child-body is ambiguous in Zeami's text. Roughly speaking, whereas due to Young-Zeami children have to exercise because they are unskilled, in Old-Zeami this is not the case. He finds rather a kind of analogy between children's movement and the performance by an expert. Both dance naturally. They are moving without paying attention to their own movement. That is, Old-Zeami finds that children's performances are perfect and ideal. He, however, demands children to acquire the basic skills.



According to Old-Zeami the performances of children are ideal. But children have to learn skills and precautions in their movement. Does this practice damage children's ideal performances? Zeami notices this difficulty. This is the reason why his philosophy of discipline is so delicate and sensitive. He expresses his wisdom in a paradoxical way. We have to teach skills and precautions to children, while conserving children's ideal movements within their skills. We have to respect children's natural movement carefully. Skills are accompanied by children's natural fluid movements.

The acquisition of SKILLS is not the final goal. It is dangerous for children to be constrained by skills.

Zeami, however, demands children to practice basic skills repeatedly. He prohibits them from imitating the natural fluid movement of the virtuoso. Children have to learn basic skills diligently and after the mastery of skills they have to cast off these skills.

This is the wisdom of Zeami's DOUBLE-EYES. DOUBLE-EYES contain diverse paradoxes. For him the idea of DOUBLE-EYES is never a paradox, whereas for us (people with the single-eye) his idea seems a paradox.

Instructors in the rank of SKILLS sometimes overlook this paradoxical dynamism. On the one hand, they tend to consider the master of skills as a goal of practice and try to accommodate children into their skills. On the other hand, they tend to consider children's movements ideal and leave them alone or prevent them from conducting a regular practice.

It is important to see the whole paradoxical dynamism.

## CONCLUSION

The essence of Noh (Zeami called it the 'flower' of Noh) cannot be taught directly, like skills or techniques; it is transmitted, like heat or fragrance.

Zeami tells us, however, we should never try to transmit 'flower' directly to children. We should initiate children into skills and techniques carefully in the beginning. After the mastery of skills there comes the level of what can never be taught. Skills and techniques should dissolve to make 'flower' fragrant.

Zeami tells us, however, we should not remain at this level. We should go further and discover the new perspective of DOUBLE-EYES.

The perspective of DOUBLE-EYES is the wisdom of Zeami's theoretical text and it is also a typical perspective of the Eastern Philosophy.

## REFERENCE

Zeami (2008) *Performance Notes*, T. Hare (trans.) (New York, Columbia University Press).